

Further reading

D. Higgins, 'A Taxonomy of Sound Poetry', http://www.ubu.com/papers/Higgins_sound.html.

Michael Hirsch, *Lieder Nach Texten aus dem Täglichen Leben* (Berlin: Edition Juliane Klein, 2002).

Michael Hirsch, 'Theatre in Small quantities – on composition for speech, sound and objects' in. David Roesner & M. Rebstock (eds.), *Composed Theatre: Aesthetics, Practices and Processes* (Bristol: Intellect, forthcoming 2011).

Jorg Lensing, Speaking at: David Roesner & M. Rebstock, *Processes of devising composed theatre* (AHRC funded conference, Exeter University).

Tony Lopez, *Meaning Performance* (Cambridge: Salt, 2006).

J. Moran, *Interdisciplinarity*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

C. Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci. Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (New York: Rizoli, 1980).

David Roesner, 'The polyphony of performance: Musicalization in contemporary German Theatre', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 18:1, pp. 44-55.

David Roesner, *Processes of Devising Composed Theatre* (Exeter, 2009).

Post-Avant: A Meta-Narrative

What is post-avant? How do you find the edge? And why is it all about sex anyway? Adam Field finds new pathways

Some time during the summer of 2009, I initiated a discourse on my blog, Stoning the Devil. The object of this discourse was to give the term “post-avant” concrete significations. “Post-avant” is a term with a mysterious history and an unknown etymology. Up until the discourse, no one had demonstrated the initiative to fix the term in place. That it signified, in some sense, contemporary experimental poetry, was well known; what, specifically, made post-avant poetry post-avant (rather than, say, Language poetry or Flarf) was not known.

Prior to the composition of this discourse (which was very much interactive, in a “blog,” virtual context) I had devised a definition of post-avant; I called it “the diasporic movement of Language poetry towards a new synthesis with narrative and erotic elements.” I still find this to be, on some levels, a viable definition, but a little top-heavy and academic to use in a blog context (where the patience of deliberate reading habits is only slowly becoming common, both for readers and writers.) The wedge I used into this discourse was something more like a sound-bite in the American press; I defined post-avant as “anything with an edge.” I feel ambivalent about this move now – if “diasporic movement” was top-heavy and academic, “edge” was vague and too catch-all. But I forged ahead with “edge,” and the discourse took off. Largely through links placed on a number of blogs,

the discourse gained hundreds of readers, but generated mostly critical comments.

What I would like to do in this essay is explore some pieces of the discourse that still seem interesting, in a context (print anthology) that encourages patient reading and serious, formalized commentary. In the end, I believe that the post-avant discourse is more intriguing for bits and pieces it generated than for what it told its audience about this amorphous entity, “post-avant,” which has still yet to generate currency or a strong foot-hold among a wide number of poets.

One primary issue that got addressed in passing, and that I find interesting, is the issue of movement-titles: specifically, whether they are ciphers or not. Here is how I chose to address the issue in the blog discourse:

Many people continue to complain that “post-avant,” as a phrase, is meaningless, a cipher. I would not necessarily disagree that “post-avant,” in and of itself, is a cipher, but I do not find this to be a problem...what does “post-modern,” in and of itself, mean? Whatever comes after Modernism, whatever that happens to be? What about “Romanticism” or “Symbolism”?

In the heat of the moment, I neglected to mention poetry movements to which relevant appellations have been affixed, like Objectivism and Surrealism. Many people who commented had specific complaints about the term “post-avant”; that it is logically absurd, because it is impossible to be “post” whatever “avant” is. A more thoughtful take than the one I presented on my blog (or the responses my detractors offered) might walk a middle ground between these two responses; that literary appellations used to designate movements have a so-so success ratio, when measured

in terms of their resonant power. It would be nice if self-conscious literary creators could aim for the upwards target, name their movements with a certain amount of caution and deliberation; but the lesson here may be that naming movements is generally a haphazard venture. Not everything that sticks, name-wise, sticks for a reason; the arbitrary nature of the signifier is applicant even in situations when (poets think) it should not be. Other issues that came up in the context of the discourse have even more rich complications, which will move us farther from post-avant and closer, I hope, to issues with more permanent relevance.

Here is a basic issue that came up repeatedly: to be an artist (rather than merely a poet) using poetry as a means of expression, how wide does

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one’s frame of reference need to be; to put it in another (perhaps more positive) light, what is the maximum range potential for poets (by range, I mean

diversified knowledge of the arts, as arts)? I brought this up online, and I bring it up again here, because I believe that poets over the last forty years have lost something. I specifically designate fifty years because fifty years roughly corresponds to the advent of post-modernism which, despite the cipher status of its common name, has revolutionized the world of the visual arts (including film) while poetry has (arguably, at least in its mainstream manifestations) remained virtually untouched. What have been the manifestations of post-modernism in the visual arts? In large measure, straightforward painting has been marginalized, in favor of videos, installations, and conceptual pieces. In this case, it is not so much the forms but the import of the forms that matters— in these works, visual artists

have made strides towards new definitions of space, bodies, sexuality, language, history, and the contentious relationship of art and politics. The only major poetry movement of the past fifty years that can make similar claims is Language poetry – however, I have seen little acknowledgement among Language poets of what these visual artists have achieved. This is important because the visual artists (from Warhol to Nauman) were mining this terrain for 15-20 years before the Language poets emerged in cohesive form in the 1980s. Moreover, visual artists like Warhol, Nauman, and more contemporary artists like Mike Kelley, Jeff Koons, and Paul McCarthy have conquered the museums, galleries, and art-markets, while Language poetry remains barely acknowledged by mainstream poetry publishers, journals, and academies. In other words, the Language poets have been considerably less successful than the visual artists in disseminating their version of post-modernism, and were beat to the punch into the bargain. All this combines to give experimental poetry the look of a lag-behind. There are good reasons to support the notion that art-forms should not compete with each other. Nevertheless, the demarcations have become so pronounced that visual artists rarely even mention contemporary poetry. I (unabashedly) believe that this is a problem. It certainly cannot be rectified by one article, but it is an issue that deserves as much attention as any nascent poetry movement.

I am proud that the discourse touched on levels more fundamental than “frames of reference” and “maximum range potentials.” I made the argument that two essential constituent elements of artistic process have a preponderant quality, which much experimental poetry has denied them: subjectivity and representation. Often, an emphasis has been placed on non-representational poetry, and the stance that manifestly subjective poetry imposes a kind of closure on poems-as-constructs. There is undoubtedly some truth to these positions, especially as regards mainstream verse, which tends to lean heavily on the subjectivity of poets as a perceived wellspring of

universal wisdom. Representation becomes the tool by which this wisdom is revealed to the world. Dealing with poems that I called “post-avant” or “edgy” allowed me to open up the possibility that perhaps experimental poets have thrown out too much. Poets in this milieu tend to defend their aesthetic decisions by falling back on the tenets of Deconstructionism – that words, though arbitrary, are tactile and sensuous, capable of carrying the weight of poems, series of poems, and books, in and of themselves. I find this problematic, on several levels – firstly, because I do not enjoy engaging texts that preserve what I perceive to be myths about language (that the tactility of words is sufficient to justify a thematically, narratively, and affectively impoverished text); secondly, because contemporary experimental poets

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have failed to win a significant number of converts, either among the general public or among wide numbers of poets; thirdly, because new generations are rising up, that are looking for fresh perspectives and

novel directions; as such, I would hope that rehashing the textual ethos of an earlier movement would not seem particularly interesting. Roland Barthes discusses the necessity of *bits* of narrative, *bits* of representation; as he says, “the text needs its shadow” (32) – the novels of Robbe-Grillet demonstrate how this can be done. There are few post-modern poetry texts that raise possibilities of intermittent subjectivity and representation to the apotheosis that a text like *Jealousy* does, and all too often these texts are simply evacuated of any traces of humanity. They tend to be hermetic, and exceedingly prudish.

There is a definite perversity to denying the preponderance of subjectivity and representation, and not necessarily an endearing perversity. The truth is straightforward: words not charged with at least traces of subjectivity and representational import, words which are *merely* tactile, generally hold little pleasure for most audiences.

Once it is acknowledged that subjectivity and representation are, in some senses, preponderant, questions arise as to *what* should be represented and *who* should be representing it. Much of the poetry I was writing about is both overtly narrative and explicitly sexual— thus, I argued for post-avant as a movement with “sex at the center.” Central inclusion of sexuality in an art-movement seems so obvious in so many ways (sex having been at the center of most art-forms for the length of recorded history) that it

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into frigidity by their teachers. So, like arguing that blinks should follow a poke in the eye, I argued for sex at the center of post-avant. The texts I used to posit this argument were ones like Brooklyn Copeland’s chapbook *Borrowed House*, which uses sex as one component part of a mosaic woven of desire, dark imagery, need for intimacy and impulses to confess (which never quite shade into the melodramatic bathos of Confessionalism.) The rag and bone shop of the heart that Yeats wrote of has all the durability and permanence (not to mention tactility) of words, with the added bonus that affect, sexuality, and their representations are *not* arbitrary. They are born out of lived experience, which is (willy-nilly) as preponderant as subjectivity and representation. “Write what you know” is a pretty hoary

may seem strange that I felt the need to argue for sex’s centrality. However, I feel that the new generation of experimental poets has been, in many senses, sanitized

cliché— nevertheless, like most clichés, there is a grain of truth to it. Writing what you know does not necessitate the impartation of universal wisdom, or even an attempt to do so— we can know disjuncture, ellipse, torqued forms of narrativity— but it does presuppose the preponderance of subjectivity, that I continue to argue for. Hard as it is to believe, all these home-truths (some of which border, admittedly, on platitudes) have not been spoken in an experimental poetry context in decades. In earlier contexts, they would have all the surprise of a tautology or axiom; in 2010, I hope they may be relevant, even revelatory. All these are the *what*; as to the *who*, it is my conviction that any poet (male or female) should be able to write as much about sex as they wish. The only ideology that is useful for an artist is one of complete freedom. Special interest groups want political correctness; artists (and I do not mean to romanticize the status of artists) know that there is no “correctness” in politics or anywhere else. Correctness is relative, and “correct” for an artist is whatever forms conform to the myriad shapes of subjectivities that can be manifested in text.

The problem, as I see it, is that most poets currently writing in the English language approach poetry in a way consonant with what I call minor

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artist strategies. They let their texts be dictated by little rule books and primers they carry around; everything must be defined, everything must be spelled out. Approaches to representation and its sword-carrier, narrative, are decided beforehand; and those that do away with narrative do away with thematics into the bargain. Who wants to read poetry with no themes? Those who willfully obfuscate away from narrative build little but obsolescence into their poems. Likewise, those who take a

hackneyed approach to narrative guarantee that their poems can be of no continuing interest, as invention is effaced from their discipline. That rare middle ground, where narrative approaches are concerned, in which invention is met by discipline, and old themes are endlessly refreshed, is only accessible to those who approach poetry like the major high art form it is. "Post-avant," as I have defined it, is an ideal; it occupies the space wherein that rare middle ground approach to representation can be occupied and reoccupied. These issues may be pertinent to anyone who feels that the second half of century XX saw too much taken away too fast from English language poetry; and who want to see vistas open up that can lead our poetry back to the safety of danger, the middle ground of extremes, and the timeliness of permanence.

Further reading

Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York: Farrar Straus, 1975).

Adam Fieled, *Stoning the Devil*, <http://www.adamfieled.blogspot.com> (2009).

ROOTS MANUVA'S ROMANTIC SOUL

Keats, Wordsworth and... Roots Manuva? David Barnes on the Romantic Rapper

Everybody thinks they know what the Romantic poets were all about – long, solitary walks through the Lake District, opium-induced visions, flouncy shirts and daffodils. Yet the ripples from Romanticism are far-reaching, and turn up in some unexpected places in modern society – most oddly, perhaps, in the lyrics of contemporary British rap artists. For me, the work of the rapper Roots Manuva provides the most perfect convergence of urban angst and Romantic lyric. As in the poetry of Wordsworth, Byron and Coleridge, Roots Manuva writes about negotiating and processing the self. One can see the same self-conscious, raw honesty – an honesty that is self-conscious because it's painfully aware that it reveals too much.

In contrast to the popular image of rap as violence, misogyny and bragging, the lyrics of Roots Manuva are complex and multi-layered. Roots (Rodney Smith, to give him his real name) was born in South London in 1972. He grew up in Stockwell, the son of a Pentecostal deacon and lay preacher, a family situation he has rapped about:

I was raised in a Pentecostal church of God
My father was the deacon, he used to stand preaching
I used to steal collection, I used to catch a beating.
(‘Sinny Sin Sins’ , 2001)